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Will Pakistan's new Prime Minister Imran Khan deliver a 'new' Pakistan?

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Pakistan's democratic history has been turbulent at best. The first attempts at democracy in the wake of Pakistan's independence in 1947 came at a time of fear of Indian military action within Pakistan, and during the global bipolarisation of the Cold War. These circumstances led to Pakistan and the United States pouring important resources into the Pakistani military. The consequence was the rapid growth of the military while civil institutions were left behind. In response to this and due to a fear of fractures within civil society being manipulated by foreign actors, Pakistan chose to take a centralised approach to its politics. These events, in combination with periods of direct military rule and Islamist influence, paved the way for the inequality of modern Pakistan's political and social landscape -- not to mention the inherent democratic and constitutional weaknesses present today. Although these entrenched differences disadvantage almost all citizens within Pakistan, minority groups are by far the most marginalised.

Pakistan's minority groups account for less than 5% of the population, and estimates suggest that Muslims make up between 95 and 97 percent of Pakistan's total population. Pakistan's founding father, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, outlined his vision for a tolerant Pakistan, which championed the equality of all citizens, in his famous speech on August 11, 1947. However, this vision remains to be realised. As the State inches towards Islam in its rhetoric in an attempt to add legitimacy to its rule, and as extremist Islamic groups gain ground, the marginalisation of and discrimination against minority groups looks set to increase.

The situation looks grim for minority rights in Pakistan. A recent report has named Pakistan one of the most hostile nations for religious minorities. Obviously, issues such as these will pose a challenge to the government of Pakistan's new prime minister, Imran Khan, who came to power this August promising a new era of responsibility and prosperity. His Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party won as many as 119 seats of 270 National Assembly

(NA) contested seats. Although it fell short of an outright majority, by allying with small parties, it managed to form a coalition.

Vision, Wisdom and Leading from the Front; these were the qualities of Imran Khan as a cricketer when he led Pakistan to their first ever World Cup victory in 1992. But Pakistani politics is not cricket. It is far more complicated and difficult, especially when the country's political history has seen endemic dynastic and army rule since the 1950s.

Can the new Prime Minister unite the country and fight long-entrenched political and social evil? Obviously, there are no simple solutions to complex issues such as the skyrocketing trade deficit, balancing the country's competing foreign policy priorities, and curbing discrimination against religious minorities.

The politics of regeneration and the rise of Imran Khan

Establishing his party in 1996, Khan was mocked by many who felt that he would not be able to make his way in Pakistan's strong two-party system. The Pakistan Muslim League's (commonly known as Nawaz - PML-N) grip over the largest province of Punjab and Pakistan's People Party's (PPP) who have control over the second largest province of Sind, made it difficult for Imran Khan to break the two-party system. In the general elections of 2013, Khan's party only secured 33 seats in National Assembly, yet it succeeded in forming a provincial government in the North West province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Obviously, Pakistan's Old Guards from the PML-N and PPP thought Imran Khan would fail in KP and would therefore jeopardise his political future. Quite to the contrary of his political opponents' beliefs, his party-led government made the province a model for the whole country. Unlike its predecessors, Khan's party brought some tangible governance reforms which greatly contributed to his popularity in the run-up of the 2018 general election in the province and in the country as whole.

Since 2013 PTI has been on the frontline of development in KP, partnering with NGOs, social enterprise representatives, the private sector and international development agencies. For example, for the first time in the country's history, the PTI led government in

KP passed a police ordinance (KPPO 2016) which legally empowered the Inspector General (IG) of police to resist any political interference from the incumbent government. This was a significant development in a country like Pakistan where the police are used for political victimisation. The other provinces including Sind (ruled by PPP) failed to reform the police system even after repeated requests from the police department. Sind's provincial chief AD Khawaja, while criticising the old law, said, "if society expects us to fight 21st century crime, why are we using laws from 1861 (referring to 1861 law passed by the British colonial government to make the police a 'force' and not a 'service')?" Reducing political interference in KP helped to make the police a more professional institution and more able to deal effectively with terrorism.

In the health sector, Imran Khan's led PTI government also introduced health reforms such as the Sehat Sahulat insurance programme which will cover 70 per cent of the population in the province. The insurance allows a household to utilise up to Rs. 540,000 for health treatment in any public and private hospital across the province. In addition to this, the government also paid attention to ensure the presence of doctors in the far-flung rural areas in an attempt to improve the governance of major hospitals in the provincial capital. A recent survey conducted by the Herald in 2018, evaluating the state of healthcare in Pakistan, showed that in the province of Sind, only 48 percent respondents termed the health provisions in the province as average and another 44 percent termed it below average or poor. Only 7 percent rated it above average or excellent. On the other hand, in KP 54 percent of those surveyed termed the health services in the province as average, only 18 percent rated them below average, and 26 percent rated them above average or excellent. It is important to note that when the survey was conducted, PPP has been in power in Sind for last five terms while PTI has just finished its first term in KP. The provincial government of Imran Khan has also brought some significant changes in the education sector. Recently, the government in KP rebuilt schools that had been destroyed by radical Islamists. Bear in mind, Malala Yousafzai, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and a Pakistani women's rights activist, was actually born in the KP province, where she opposed the Taliban's attempts to ban girls' schooling. The PTI also recruited some 40,000 teachers through the National Testing Service (NTS). According to a survey conducted in 2017 to assess the infrastructure of Pakistan public schools, KP showed considerable improvement and remained ahead of other provinces.

Pakistan's climate change problem

Last year, Neil Buhne, UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Pakistan, said that if the world does not slow climate change, Pakistan is among the six countries that will be most affected. Obviously, as a country Pakistan itself needs to reduce its vulnerability to climate change. The KP government led by PTI paid heed to this concern, especially in regards to reversing the increasing deforestation in the province. They initiated the billion tree plantation project to help cope with current environmental challenges. The project surpassed the Bonn challenge by restoring trees in 350,000 hectares of degraded forest landscapes. The provincial government claimed that the project would help reduce the impacts of climate change while providing green jobs, and that this model could be replicated throughout the rest of the country. "The Billion Tree Tsunami initiative is a true conservation success story, one that further demonstrates Pakistan's leadership role in the international restoration effort and continued commitment to the Bonn Challenge," said Inger Anderson, Director General of IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature). The successful plantation of one billion trees was a major achievement on the part of the KP government. Unlike KP, the government of Sind province also initiated a mangrove plantation drive, but deforestation continued in the province with the further encroachment of 145,000 acres of forestland by the powerful tribal leaders there.

Imran Khan breaks cycle of dynastic and army rule?

Unlike the PTI party, both PPP and PML-N are strongly dominated by dynasties. The leadership of these parties are already facing major corruption charges against them. PML-N is controlled by Nawaz Sharif (the former Pakistani Prime Minister, who is now in jail due to being convicted in the leaking of the Panama Papers) and his brother Shahbaz Sharif (the current opposition leader). Shahbaz Sharif's son Hamza Shahbaz heads the party in Punjab. PPP is controlled by Asif Zardari (the Late Prime Minister Benazi Bhutto's spouse) and their son Bilawal Bhutto. The advantage Imran Khan has over his rival parties, is that he does not have any kith and kin in the party and he strongly criticises both PPP and PML-N because of their family run nature which has also affected the vote bank of the two parties. Imran Khan's promises of strict accountability, his drive against corruption, reforming the

governance system and strengthening of parliament still remain to be fulfilled, but if he does keep his promises, he will certainly pave the way for a new Pakistan. Critics wonder whether he will bring reforms with his inexperienced team and whether his government can pursue an independent foreign policy in the presence of strong army.

The Protection of Minorities: The Achilles' heel of Pakistan

One particular area that Pakistan always struggles with however, is the lack of opportunities for religious minorities. Though Imran Khan has pledged that he wants to follow the legacy of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, this legacy entails that all citizens of Pakistan - irrespective of their caste, race and religion - will enjoy the same rights of freedom, equality and justice. Khan's own provincial government however, has been criticised for failing to include any woman or members of any of religious minorities in the province within the cabinet. This is where his ambitions meet reality. This means Khan's egalitarian vision of "Naya (New) Pakistan" will soon perish if he keeps moving along the same track of anti-minority practices such as intolerance etc. As Pakistan has already created the legal framework against minorities with its anti-minority laws, starting with the anti-Ahmadi legislation, Imran Khan needs to be realistic about the likelihood for rapid change in Pakistan on minority rights. The mixture of politics and religion has already proved incendiary in Pakistan's polity. For example, according to Human Rights Watch at least 19 people were on death row in 2017 after being condemned under Pakistan's blasphemy law and hundreds were being kept in jails while awaiting trial - including Aasia Bibi (a Pakistani Christian woman), who has been on death row for nine years - the first woman to face a potential execution for blasphemy. In early November 2018, Pakistan's Supreme Court cleared her of all blasphemy charges and ordered her release.

In the run-up to the general election, Imran Khan promised religious freedom as well as equal opportunities and rights for minorities to ensure that they lead dignified lives. As someone who has never held federal executive office before, Khan will quickly realise that these promises are not easy tasks in the face of country's constitutionally entrenched religious clauses which offer hardly any protection to Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis and other religious minorities.

Concluding Remarks

Imran Khan's PTI party did not win enough seats to form a majority government. As a result, Khan worked to create a governing coalition. The international community, and particularly investors and donor agencies, have been waiting for a front-led government that is capable of making tough decisions. Although Imran Khan's government does not carry the taints and controversies of past governments, it remains to be seen whether Pakistan's brand new Prime Minister can work well enough together with governing partners to pull the country out of the decades long entrenched social evils such as the problems surrounding minority rights.

However, the hope that Imran Khan provides in regard to changing Pakistan's political landscape is actually set against his own commitment to defend the controversial blasphemy law. With this mindset, whatever goodwill Khan has on the issue of minority rights and minority protection, his five year term may not be enough to counter decades of religious extremism and persecution. No wonder minority communities are already attempting to help themselves. Some marginalised communities have set up their own associations and councils such as the Pakistan Hindu Panchayat and the Pakistan Hindu Council in an attempt to protect their rights, allow the airing of grievances and to help create a sense of identity and unity within the communities themselves. These efforts do help create some space for minorities to survive in the face of a difficult and intolerant political and social environment, but they are only a small drop in the ocean and are unlikely to be able to create impactful, long term change without prominent support in the political scene.